False Conflict

By Allan Parker, edited by Andrew Heys

About the author and this article…

Allan Parker is one of Australia's leading facilitators and trainers. Allan has an excellent record of success with groups in dispute and has facilitated long lasting agreements to many deeply entrenched organisational, multi-party and large community and organisational disputes. Allan's approach, however, differs from many other conventional dispute settlement approaches.

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In this article Allan outlines some of the central aspects of what he calls his 'agreement focussed' approach. One of the most startling revelations of his work is the observation that work teams, which are seemingly locked in dispute, are actually dealing with the manifest elements of what may be termed 'false' conflict, that is the parties are not in dispute over substantive issues or fundamental human needs.

This type of situation is described in Allan's approach as 'category one' conflict. When this phenomenon occurs, parties can be locked into a cycle of escalation and entrenchment and the original source of the conflict may become clouded and distorted. When these disputes are effectively analysed, it is often revealed that such conflicts are the result of little more than poor planning or inadequate group formation.

Such situations can often be exacerbated by attempts to intervene that overemphasise the points of difference, or disagreement, and ignore the often larger areas of agreement. Initially focussing groups on their points of agreement has been the key to Allan's success in many group disputes.

He discusses his approach here. The article is in 6 sections entitled:

- An agreement focused approach
- Categories of conflict
- Recognising conflict
- Getting the most from teams
- When a team gets off track
- Facilitated conflict resolution

An agreement focussed approach

Case study: A project team has been created by the senior management of a multi-national company. Following both internal and external recruitment, the team has been given the brief, to develop a strategy to improve on and capture a newly emerging market. A senior manager has been assigned to lead the project and keep it on schedule. The team has also been told that they are operating on a tight time schedule and that delivery of the service to the marketplace in a timely manner is essential. With little or no work on the formation of the group, the task is launched into. Whilst the group's work requires close coordination, it is also very creative, requiring the individual members to have a degree of autonomy. For this reason some of the group chose at times to work from home.

Initial examples of the team's work have been productive but below expectations. One member of the group has a very different view on the means to effectively complete the project. Whilst his approach is quite different, there are signs that this member's ideas are quite innovative, and the way they are expressed is often quite abrupt. Also this team member does not have much time for team meetings, nor does he like to be told how to work or to engage in peer review, and he also particularly likes to work from home.

There is a small but growing number of the team who are starting to view this member as a distraction to the overall work of the group. They have therefore begun to ostracise him. The project leader is concerned that the team's unity is fracturing, however she cannot help but be impressed with the quality of the work from the 'difficult' employee.

As the time for completion approaches, it is increasingly clear that the project is behind schedule and squabbles among the team members have become more common and more personal. Consequently, the team is now focussing large amounts of their energy on the latest escapade of 'the problem person', the 'inadequacies' of the manager and the impossibility of delivering the project on time. The project leader believes her worst nightmares are coming true. She is considering engaging an external consultant to resolve the dispute with the 'difficult' employee and the team.

Categories of conflict

This scenario is a typical example of what is a common phenomenon, what I term 'false' or 'category one' conflict. Category one conflict is far more common than one might assume, particularly in organisational contexts.

The term category one conflict refers to conflict within groups who are operating in the absence of agreed norms, an agreed purpose or outcomes. Groups that are locked into performing their task without these basic group management stages in place, naturally experience difficulties. One cannot say, however, that they are experiencing conflict because they have not negotiated the way that they will work. The effects arising from category one conflict are quite similar to other group difficulties, however, the causes and approach differ markedly.

'Category two' conflict, is a more serious category of difficulties. Category two describes a situation in which the group simply does not have agreed norms and behaviour codes and is experiencing related conflict.

'Category three' is the most severe of the three categories and operates where the group does in fact have established norms, it has a purpose and or agree outcomes, but is still in conflict.

Effectively approaching groups in dysfunction is often dependent upon being able to recognise the difference between each of these categories and effectively matching a strategy or approach to the gradient of the group's difficulty.

While groups in situations resembling this scenario will often define their relationship as being conflicted, clarification often suggests otherwise. In my personal experience conflicts, which occur in organisational settings, frequently display characteristics of false conflict. In fact I would estimate this to be true in approximately 90% of all group disputes in which I have been involved in the past 10 years.

How can one identify when group conflict shows characteristics that signal the conflict may be false?

Firstly, one can identify some of the common precursors of false conflict. False conflict can often occur in groups where all members of the team or group have not physically come together as one, to meet, negotiate and plan their working relationship; where a purpose for operating is not clearly defined, articulated or agreed; where a common or mutually beneficial outcome has not been established and in groups where the guidelines, boundaries and roles have not been established or agreed upon.

Recognising conflict

A common signal of false conflict is when the group members put more of their time, conversation and attention on the problems, negative issues and dysfunction, than on the desired outcomes, possible options and alternatives. Indeed, in this setting a common pattern of behaviour is not only focussing on the undesired, it is also a propensity to validate and rationalise the undesired. Relating back to the creative work team scenario, the team members might be heard to say 'this situation is typical of creative teams working on a tight schedule - management should have known this would occur'. They are validating and reinforcing the undesired state rather than attempting to move to a more desired state.

False conflict often occurs due to the absence of some fundamental group management steps which Tuckman (1965) refers to as forming and norming i.e. setting purpose, mutual outcomes and behaviour codes. Surprising as it may seem, the failure to undertake this work is often at the core of many group disputes. These situations can be highly emotional and potentially stressful, however, if carefully managed, such dilemmas are often readily negotiable. Given some careful analysis, and often pre-negotiation meetings with individuals, what may have seemed to be a substantial conflict may no longer exist and certainly may not require third party intervention.

Whilst often such disputes seem insurmountable many are, in fact, examples of disputes in which the parties have a large amount of agreement in place; they simply have not recognised it exists. To accomplish the effective management of groups in conflict is undoubtedly challenging, and requires specific skills, and a well-developed understanding of the functioning of groups. For this reason entering into these disputes with a conventional conflict intervention model could serve to highlight the negatives and exacerbate existing difficulties. A group focussed approach is much more likely to put the manifest disputes into their proper perspective. It will allow the group to revisit and renew their goals, its dynamics and functions.

Getting the most from teams

Increasingly one sees organisations moving toward team-based approaches. Greater levels of decision-making power are being divested to project or work teams from the senior levels. The growing empowerment of communities has also meant greater demands by stakeholders to participate in decisions that affect them.

Many large organisations also rely much more on outsourcing and on the use of consultants than ever before. Such consultants are often engaged to add value to the work of teams, assess and improve processes, and assist change. Again there is a move towards flexible work practices, innovation, consensus and participation. The content of many tertiary management courses also reflect and support these trends. Their focus is on the importance of teams, strategy, visions and values, flexibility and participation.

Within this context, senior managers demand more innovative and imaginative employees. Yet this is just a part of the equation; to achieve success according to these core principles, two things needs to occur. Firstly, the organisation needs to recruit people who can function in this environment; secondly, the management of these teams must be committed to creating the conditions within the organisation where positive results can occur. Thus, the team must be given enough room to perform, to be monitored, guided, given feedback and appropriate direction when needed. This role, along with strategic development and leadership, is essential for success in the environment of modern management.

Getting the most from teams working in this environment requires effective group management to result in the group working productively. Such work can result in constructive planning and communication of the expectations of the team's goals, its norms (or rules), behaviour codes, indicators of success, key roles and areas of accountability. All too frequently inadequate attention is placed on these issues; a failure which often sets teams up for premature or even unnecessary conflict. If group norms are not clearly established, teams can get into personal antagonisms and disputes. These result from the absence of group fundamentals and the team can find itself completely off track, with no sense of what has gone wrong, or how to fix it.

When jobs are on the line, and accountabilities are being more closely attended to, it can be tempting for managers to revert to type and become highly directive. Conversely, they may seek to engage a mediator to settle the internal conflicts between individuals within the team. Neither approach is addressing the real issue.

What can a third party, consultant or manager do when a group or team gets off track?

When a team gets off track

It is useful is such case to take what may be termed a 'group-centred' agreement approach. When one is faced with a multi-party or group dispute, often the best place to focus is on the big picture of the group, its functions, roles, core values and the strategic plan in place. It is important for an external facilitator not to get bogged down in the 'he said, she said', details of group disputes. Of course, one needs to be aware of existing or important interpersonal disputes; the parties themselves like to be able to discuss such issues with an external party. Also the information provided is often illustrative of structural or group issues. However the interpersonal disputes, in many instances, must be dealt with professionally and in their proper perspective. Such issues should not be allowed to dominate the attention of the group, nor of the facilitator.

An important step for groups in conflict is to review where the group is at in terms of its development. There is a range of models one can use. Discussing the stages of group development through the use of an illustrative model, for example, such as Tuckman's, is a useful way for groups to begin to reflect on a their norms and functions. Within this broader discussion of the group, personal conflicts, which may have been caused by structures, may appear less severe and more negotiable to individual parties.

The agreement focussed approach begins with an assessment of the amount of agreement that exists within the group. An important place to start is by asking the group what they agree upon. Do they, for example, agree that they want to have a rewarding workplace? Do they all want the outcomes of the team to be positive and address the needs of the entire group? Do all the group have the desire to provide a well respected product or service? These are 'high chunk' questions that elicit agreement. Such questions can help a group to become more focussed upon the large amount of agreement that exists within their team.

This simple technique can prove to be extraordinarily powerful in putting disputes into perspective. Later on, in working the group, it will be necessary to 'chunk down' your questions to the specifics of what form agreements will take, such as new group norms and codes of conduct. This, however, must take place once agreement is developed and noted. One needs to note that the approach is to move toward specifics, not start at them, as is often the case.

The amount of agreement that exists may also be unconscious. The group may, for example, be in agreement on a range of issues such as: the fact that they want to continue to work together; the process they have decided to follow in moving their working relationship forward; and they are likely to all agree on the desirability of achieving the stated outcomes of the group. Often in group conflict the focus is so much on what's wrong, the problems or the points of dispute. This means the perspective that we do have many points of agreement gets overlooked.

Facilitated conflict resolution

As an external facilitator one is often challenged by time. An important priority, therefore, is to attune the participants to the amount of agreement that already exists. This approach is not simply a 'trick' designed to gloss over the disputes; it is an approach, which is often unexpected and invariably puts the disputed issues into perspective.

My experience is that making the extent of the agreement explicit has had the effect of refocussing the group on the reasons why they are working together. It starts the process of refocussing the team on a positive note. It creates recognition that, in many cases, the dispute exists or originates out of the fact that mutually beneficial outcomes are not clearly defined, understood, owned or agreed upon. Also many group disputes arise out of the need for, or ambiguity of, group norms i.e. policy, behaviour codes and role clarification.

Most intervention approaches do not start at this general or macro level. Rather, they go initially to the point of greatest disagreement. Traditional alternative dispute resolution (ADR) approaches, when applied in groups, can miss the mark. Such approaches will often assume that the parties have an ongoing relationship without exploring the elements of the relationship or the shared values underlying the relationship. Practitioners often begin by asking the parties to define the conflict from their individual perspective in terms of their interests and/or needs. The third party then encourages some venting, perhaps mutual understanding and, perhaps, some expressions of contrition.

The process then moves to the development of mutually beneficial and mutually generated options for resolution of the problem, rather than achievement of the outcome, and thence to an implementation strategy. In a group context, this approach often falls flat, because the parties begin to define their relationship in terms of their differences rather than in terms of what they share i.e. what they already agree upon. The traditional approach, applied in groups, can inadvertently encourage parties to see their relationship as dominated by difference and dispute. In many cases, however, the extent of agreement actually far outweighs the disputation.

Starting from the points of greatest agreement is an approach, which helps to build momentum and focus the group on its purpose. The approach helps members of the group put their interpersonal disputes into perspective. Naturally, there are instances where additional work needs to be done, outside of the context of group work, to assist individual members to work through their own interpersonal disputes. Such a group focussed approach can also reveal other workplace issues such as occupational health and safety issues or instances of discrimination or even harassment which may need to be dealt with more formally and away from the group setting.

This approach may also reveal that the group itself needs to review structures, its rules, norms and expectations of each other. Such self reflection on the part of the group may not be encouraged with individually focussed approaches. My philosophy, when asked to work with a group in conflict, is to first look at the group and then reflect upon individual issues and disputes. Starting from the point of greatest agreement

encourages a positive approach to this exercise; it often reveals that the disputes are less entrenched than they have appeared and has been useful in getting teams back to work and refocussed on their goals.

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